

Wires 9/18/20

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US-Led Coalition Deploying Bradley Fighting Vehicles to Northeast Syria - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) plans to deploy Bradley fighting vehicles to northeast Syria to protect its troops, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) spokesman Col. Wayne Marotto said in a press release on Friday.

"CJTF-OIR plans to position mechanized infantry assets, including Bradley Fighting Vehicles, to Syria to ensure the protection of Coalition forces and preserve their freedom of movement so they may continue Defeat Daesh operations safely," Marotto said in the release.

US defense officials told NBC news that the deployment is aimed at projecting a show of force to discourage Russian troops from crossing into territory controlled by the coalition. The report said six Bradley fighting vehicles and nearly 100 additional US troops will be deployed to northeast Syria on a 90-day deployment.

The US military said a Russian vehicle on August 25 struck a coalition vehicle in northeast Syria. The Russian Center for Syrian Reconciliation said the patrol of the Russian military police in Syria took all possible measures to prevent an incident with the US military.

The Russian Defense Ministry said information on the Russian patrol's path, strength, and the fact that it would be accompanied by an attack helicopter was all sent to the US military in accordance with bilateral agreements between the two countries.

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Canadian Public Health Agency President Stepping Down Amid COVID-19 Spike - Letter

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) – The president of the Canadian Public Health Agency is stepping down from her post amid a spike of new coronavirus cases nationwide, Tina Namiesniowski said in an email to staff on Friday.

"I am now at the point where I need to take a break. Since it makes no sense for the Agency to be without a President for any length of time given current circumstances, I feel I must step aside so someone else can step up," Namiesniowski said in the email as quoted by CTV.

The president cited the tumultuous period that has followed since the agency first learned of the pulmonary outbreak in Wuhan.

Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam remains in her current role.

The news comes as Canada's number of novel coronavirus infections steadily climbs. Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam has said that the national spike in cases could jeopardize the country's ability to keep the spread of the pandemic at "manageable levels."

As of Friday, the number of novel coronavirus cases in Canada has surpassed 141,000 with 9,200 virus-related fatalities, government data revealed.

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Trump Calls China Bigger Problem Than Russia, Contradicting FBI

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump criticized on Friday the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Christopher Wray for overlooking China's threat to the integrity of upcoming Presidential election and focusing instead on Russia.

"I think we have a bigger problem with China than we have with Russia. I think China is a far bigger problem. And I said 'Well, it's ok if you want to think about Russia, but what about China?'" I think it's appropriate," Trump said at a White House briefing.

In his testimony to the Congress on Thursday Wray alleged that Russia is "very active" in its efforts to influence the election and "sow divisiveness and discord" denigrate Democratic rival Joe Biden.

Russia denies any attempts to interfere with US domestic affairs, including 2020 elections.

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US Deports Somali Previously Convicted of Giving Aid to Al-Shabab - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US government has deported a Somali citizen who was previously convicted of providing aid to the al-Shabab terrorist group, the Department of Justice announced in a press release on Friday.

"Officers with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) removed a Somali man Thursday who was convicted in 2016 in US District Court of providing aid to a terror organization," the release said.

Mahdi Mohammed Hashi, 31, was removed by ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) Chicago Field Office and then flown on an ICE Air Operations charter flight to Somalia, where he was handed over to the custody of local authorities, the Justice Department said. From "April 2008 to August 2012, Hashi served as a member of al-Shabab in Somalia. In 2012, he was extradited to the United States to face federal prosecution in the Eastern District of New York. Hashi pleaded guilty to providing material support to al-Shabab, and on January 29, 2016, was sentenced to nine years imprisonment and issued a judicial order of removal," the release said.

In fiscal year 2019, ICE removed or returned 267,000 aliens. ERO arrested 143,000 aliens, more than 86 percent of whom had criminal convictions or pending criminal charges, the release added.

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US May Work Out Oil Deal with Syria's Kurds - Trump

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States may work out a deal on Syrian oil with local Kurds and withdraw the troops that guard the reserves, US President Donald Trump told reporters on Friday.

"We will make a determination. We will probably be dealing with the Kurds on the oil. We'll see where it all ends up and will be out," Trump said during a White House briefing.

The US troops, jointly with the Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, maintain control over a part of northeastern Syria, concentrating around the oil and gas fields in the provinces of Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor.

Trump first announced the possible deal last month.

The Syrian government has denounced the US presence there as a violation of its sovereignty and an illegal attempt to seize Syria's natural resources.

In August, State Secretary Mike Pompeo told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that a US oil firm had secured a deal to modernize oil fields in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in an interview to Sputnik called it "the most outrageous breach of all possible principles of the international law."

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Pompeo Seeks Backing For Regional Security in Meeting with CARICOM Chief - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during a meeting with Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretary General Irwin LaRoque, emphasized the need for the organization's continuing partnership with the US in promoting regional security, the State Department said in a readout of the session on Friday.

"[Pompeo] met today with Irwin LaRocque, Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), in Georgetown, Guyana," the readout said. "The Secretary and the Secretary-General also discussed the importance of regional security and the US Caribbean Resilience Partnership, which assists in planning for natural disasters in the region."

The State Department, US Southern Command, CARICOM and ministers from 18 Caribbean nations established the Resilience Partnership in 2019 to promote both disaster management and security.

At Friday's meeting, Pompeo also credited CARICOM for helping to ensure a credible outcome to the March 2020 elections, and he asked for CARICOM's continued support in speaking out against regional threats to democracy, the readout said.

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Trump Administration Approves \$14 Billion in COVID-19 Aid for Farmers - Agriculture Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration has approved \$14 billion for US farmers impacted by the restrictive measures imposed to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) said in a statement on Friday.

"An additional \$14 billion dollars for agricultural producers who continue to face market disruptions and associated costs because of COVID-19," the statement said.

The Agriculture Department explained that the financial assistance is provided to the farmers so that they can absorb the increased marketing costs associated with the pandemic.

This is the second round of aid for farmers approved by the Trump administration since the novel coronavirus hit the United States earlier in the year. The first round, totaling \$19 billion, was rolled out in April, at the height of economic lockdowns to curb the pandemic.

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China Welcomes Canada's Assessment of Its COVID-19 Response - Foreign Ministry

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) - China appreciates the Canadian Health Minister's "objective and fair" assessment of the country's handling of the novel coronavirus pandemic, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said during a press conference on Friday.

In an interview on Sunday, Canadian Health Minister Patty Hajdu said China alerted the World Health Organization (WHO) "very early" to the threat posed by the novel coronavirus and provided the international community with the gene sequencing of the disease.

"We noticed relevant reports and applaud the Canadian health minister's objective and fair remarks," Wenbin said.

The spokesperson noted that China and Canada have cooperated during the pandemic and that Beijing welcomes all international collaborative efforts to combat the deadly disease.

Hajdu has previously come under fire from some Canadian pundits for her trust in China's COVID-19 response amid allegations that Beijing covered up the origin and spread of the disease.

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US Indicts 6 People in \$100,000 Amazon Bribery Plot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - A Washington State Grand Jury has indicted six individuals for paying \$100,000 in bribes to Amazon employees to try and gain unfair competitive advantages worth up to \$100 million, the US Department of Justice said in a news release on Friday.

"Six people have been indicted by a Grand Jury in the Western District of Washington with conspiring to pay over \$100,000 in commercial bribes to Amazon employees and contractors, in exchange for an unfair competitive advantage on the Amazon Marketplace," the release said. Ephraim Rosenberg, 45 of Brooklyn, New York; Joseph Nilsen, 31 and Kristen Leccese, 32, of New York, New York; Hadis Nuhanovic, 30, of Acworth, Georgia; Rohit Kadimsetty, 27, of Northridge, California; and Nishard Kunju, 31, of Hyderabad, India, all face charges of conspiracy and wire fraud, the Justice Department said.

"As the world moves increasingly to online commerce, we must ensure that the marketplace is not corrupted with unfair advantages obtained by bribes and kick-backs," US Attorney Brian Moran said in the release.

The defendants will make their initial appearances in US District Court in Seattle on October 15, 2020, the release said.

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Trump Says Puerto Rico to Be Designated as Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Area

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said during a press briefing on Friday that Puerto Rico will be designated as a pharmaceutical manufacturing area.

"So, if we can build Puerto Rico back into a pharmaceutical manufacturing area, we're going to designate it as such. I think it will be unbelievable for Puerto Rico," Trump said.

Trump said such a move means his administration will seek to bring back pharmaceutical manufacturing jobs to Puerto Rico.

Earlier on Friday, the White House announced the Trump administration will provide Puerto Rico with \$13 billion to help rebuild the territory's electrical grid and to support its education system following the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Maria in 2017.

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OSCE Takes 'Important Step' By Establishing Expert Mission to Belarus - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States believes Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) decision took an important step by launching an expert mission to probe alleged human rights violations and election fraud in Belarus, US Department of State spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement on Friday.

"On September 17, 17 participating States of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), including the United States, took the important step of invoking the OSCE's 'Moscow Mechanism' to establish an Expert Mission to look into credible reports of human rights abuses and violations, including election fraud, in Belarus," Ortagus said.

The spokesperson pointed out that the OSCE states decided to invoke the Moscow Mechanism in order to see a peaceful resolution to this crisis in Belarus complete with ensuring respect for the human rights as well as free and fair elections.

On August 9, incumbent leader Alexander Lukashenko won 80.1 percent of the vote and won the presidential elections in Belarus for the sixth time. The country's opposition has claimed that former presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhonovskaya won the election.

The opposition organized protests across Belarus and in the first several days law enforcement dispersed them, including by using force. However, law enforcement has since stopped dispersing the rallies and using force. More than 6,700 people were detained in the first days of protests and three protesters died in the unrest.

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Trump Says US Expects to Have Enough COVID-19 Vaccines for Every American by April

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said in a press briefing on Friday that he expects the United States to have enough doses of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccine for every American by next April.

"We expect to have enough vaccines for every American by April," Trump said.

Trump said the United States currently has three vaccine candidates in the finals stage of clinical trials and expects to have 100 million doses distributed by the end of 2020. On Wednesday, Trump said a vaccine could be distributed throughout the United States by mid-October.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield told Congress on Wednesday that a vaccine would not be widely available until mid-2021. The United States has reported more than 6.7 million novel coronavirus cases and more than 198,000 virus-related deaths as of Friday afternoon, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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Republican Senators Urge Trump to Expand Iran Sanctions to Entire Banking Sector

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican senators on Friday asked President Donald Trump to expand US sanctions against Iran to the nation's entire financial sector.

"Despite these efforts, at least 14 Iranian banks remain open and connected to the SWIFT financial messaging network for sanctions-free financial transactions, providing the regime a crucial economic lifeline," the lawmakers said in a letter.

The US previously sanctioned the Central Bank of Iran and most financial institutions, however the banks cited in the letter continue to operate without restrictions, providing fronts for the Central Bank to continue its activities, the letter said.

Extending sanctions to the 14 banks would completely sever Iran from the global financial system, further diminishing Tehran's regional influence, the letter added.

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Trump Says US Expects to Have Enough COVID-19 Vaccines for Every American by April

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"We expect to have enough vaccines for every American by April," Trump said.

Canada Shelves Free Trade Negotiations With China - Foreign Minister

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) - Canada is abandoning free trade negotiations with China amid a host of disagreements on a range of topics, Foreign Minister Francois-Philippe Champagne said in an interview on Friday.

"I don't see the conditions being present now for these discussions to continue at this time," Champagne said about trade negotiations as quoted by The Globe and Mail. "The China of 2020 is not the China of 2016."

Canada's top diplomat said that Ottawa will review its policy towards Beijing and will do so through the "lens of China of 2020."

The comments mark a major policy shift towards China that brings Canada more in line with the hardline posture adopted by the United States, Australia, and parts of the European Union.

When Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took office in 2015, his government signaled an interest in fostering deeper economic ties between the two nations.

Trudeau visited Beijing in 2016 and soon after discussions began about a possible free trade agreement. Subsequently, Canadian and Chinese delegations charged with the negotiations met three times throughout 2017.

Sino-Canadian relations soured after Canadian authorities detained Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou in 2018 at the request of the United States, which was followed by the arrests of two Canadian nationals on charges of espionage in China.

The tense relationship has been further exacerbated by Canada's condemnation of the newly enacted Chinese law on national security in Hong Kong and a suspension of some bilateral agreements with the special administrative region. Beijing has said that it reserves the right to respond to any interference on Canada's part, and the Canadian side will be held accountable for all the consequences.

Despite the tensions, China remains Canada's second largest trading partner after the United States.

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Nearly Half of US Voters Think Trump Deserves Nobel Peace Prize - Poll

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US electorate appears evenly split on whether President Donald Trump deserves the Nobel Peace Prize for recent Arab-Israeli peace efforts and reducing America's involvement in foreign wars, a Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Friday.

"[Forty-five] 45% of American Adults think Trump should be given the Nobel Peace Prize for the new peace deals and keeping America out of new wars, among other things. Forty-six percent (46%) disagree," a press release explaining the poll said.

Only 42% of those surveyed said former President Barack Obama still deserves his Nobel Peace Prize, which was awarded just after he took office in 2009.

Trump's nomination by a member of Norway's parliament was based largely on the recent agreement for the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain – two US Arab allies in the Persian Gulf region – to establish formal ties with Israel.

During his time in office, Obama launched a major surge in Afghanistan and supported efforts to topple the Libyan government.

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US Treasury Probes Racism Allegations at US Mint Bureau - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department launched an investigation into allegations of racial discrimination at the Mint, the agency responsible for circulating coins, The Wall Street Journal said on Friday.

A group of Black employees in June asked Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin to investigate what they described as "rampant racism" at the bureau, the Journal said citing a letter it had obtained.

The employees said racism was ingrained in the Mint's culture evidenced by a lack of diversity in senior ranks in the organization.

The complaints in the letter included a racial slur written as graffiti in a Mint restroom and mistreatment by a legal department that consisted of only white lawyers.

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US to Shut Down WeChat on September 20, Gives TikTok Until November 12 - Officials

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration will allow the Chinese video sharing platform TikTok to operate within the United States at least until November 12 and will shut down over the weekend another Chinese social media application called WeChat, senior US officials said on Friday.

"Our rule is not doing the same thing to TikTok as WeChat," Commerce Secretary Will Ross told Fox Business network. "WeChat US, for all practical purposes, will be shut down. As for TikTok, it's just upgrades, maintenance ... things like that would be shut down at this stage. The real shutdown will come November 12, in the event that there is not another transaction."

Earlier on Friday, the Commerce Department said President Donald Trump's executive orders will effectively block US users from accessing both applications from September 20.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the Trump administration will continue vetting a deal between TikTok and the US software company Oracle to determine if that will assuage Trump's concerns on the national security threat allegedly posed by TikTok.

"While we are reviewing the proposal trying to evaluate if it can successfully achieve those outcomes - that will be our measure - if it's the case we will allow private sector entities to move out - to execute a commercial transaction protecting the American people," Pompeo said.

The remarks by Ross and Pompeo came after weeks of negotiations involving TikTok and several US companies, including Microsoft and Walmart, to work out a partnership that would satisfy the Trump administration's concerns on protecting the data of Americans using Chinese media applications.

Trump has accused the two apps of being tools of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and that US users could have their personal data stolen.

TikTok filed a lawsuit in US court last month to continue operating in the United States. TikTok said the Trump administration's action was without any prior outreach to the company to give it

a chance to respond to the accusations, and have been in violation of the US Constitution and the firm's right to due process.

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US Lawmakers Call for 'Emergency' Probe of Feared Justice Dept. Bid to Sway Election

WASHINGTON, September 18 (September) - Four Democratic-led House panels on Friday asked the US Justice Department's watchdog to determine if Attorney General William Barr is using the Russia probe investigation to sway the November 3 election.

"We are concerned by indications that Attorney General Barr might depart from longstanding DOJ [Justice Department] principles to take public action related to US Attorney [John] Durham's investigation that could impact the presidential election," House Judiciary Chair Jerrold Nadler, Intelligence Chair Adam Schiff and two other committee heads said in a letter to Inspector General Michael Horowitz.

At issue is whether Durham, who was appointed by Barr to investigate the origins of the Russia investigation, will release a report condemning and possibly indicting former officials from the Obama administration for launching a two year probe of alleged Trump-Russian collusion. Public comments from Barr and Durham appear to have violated Justice Department policy by signaling that department could "take prosecutorial actions," make public disclosures and even issue reports prior to the November 3 election, the letter said. "Such actions clearly appear intended to benefit President Trump politically."

In a 2019 report, Horowitz found no direct evidence of Trump-Russia collusion - confirming results of an investigation by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, while detailing numerous errors, inaccuracies and omissions in FBI applications for court permission to spy on a former Trump aide.

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US Aircraft Carrier Nimitz Transits Through Strait of Hormuz - Navy

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US aircraft carrier Nimitz along with three other ships that are part of the carrier strike group sailed through the Strait of Hormuz, the Navy said in a press release on Friday.

"The aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN 68), flagship of the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group (CSG), along with the guided-missile cruisers USS Princeton (CG 59) and USS Philippine Sea (CG 58) and guided-missile destroyer USS Sterett (DDG 104), completed a scheduled transit through the Strait of Hormuz into the Arabian Gulf Sept. 18," the release said.

The Navy said the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group will operate and train with regional and coalition partners in the Persian Gulf. The release added that the strike group will also provide air support

to US troops fighting against the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia) in Iraq and Syria.

The US carrier Lincoln was the last carrier to transit through the Strait of Hormuz in late 2019.

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UN Security Council Extends Mandate of Investigative Team Probing IS Crimes for 1 Year

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Friday unanimously adopted a resolution extending the mandate of the UN Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) for an additional year.

"[The UN Security Council] decides to extend until September 18, 2021, the mandate of the Special Adviser and the Team, with any further extension to be decided at the request of the government of Iraq, or any other government that has requested the Team to collect evidence of acts that may amount to war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide, committed by ISIL [Islamic State]... in its territory," the resolution said.

The resolution also condemns the acts committed by the Islamic State, including murder, kidnapping, suicide bombings, sexual violence and trafficking in persons and recognizes that holding the perpetrators of war crimes accountable could assist in countering terrorism.

The UN Investigative Team was established in September 2017 on the request of the Security Council to the UN Secretary-General to set up a team to collect evidence and hold the Islamic State accountable for war crimes in Iraq.

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UN Libya Envoy Commends Sarraj's Decision to Resign - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - UN Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Libya Stephanie Williams praised the decision by Fayez Sarraj, the head of Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), to step down and transfer his powers to the new executive authority by the end of next month, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing on Friday.

Sarraj, who has led the GNA since March 31, 2016, announced his intention to step down on Wednesday.

"Earlier this morning, Stephanie Williams, the acting Special Representative for Libya commended the courageous decision by Fayez al-Sarraj, the President of the Presidency Council of the [GNA] in Libya, in announcing his intention to hand over power to the new executive authority by the end of October," Dujarric said.

He also said that Williams noted there is an opportunity now to restart a fully inclusive intra-Libyan political dialogue, which the UN mission there plans to move forward with at the earliest opportunity.

Dujarric added that in the meantime, the international community must respect Libya's sovereignty and the arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council.

The confrontation in Libya continues between the GNA, which controls Tripoli and territories in the west of the country, and the Libyan National Army (LNA), under the command of Marshal Khalifa Haftar, which cooperates with the parliament sitting in the east — in Tobruk. The GNA is supported by Turkey and Qatar, and the LNA is backed by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

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Canada Retail Sales Slow After 2 Months of Sky-High Growth - Statistics Agency

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian retail sales significantly slowed after two months of blistering growth, a Statistics Canada retail trade report showed on Friday.

Retail sales rose by only 0.6% to nearly \$54 billion in July compared to spikes of 24% in June and 18 percent in May. Preliminary data showed August rose by just 1.1%, signaling the sudden malaise will continue.

The July rise was led by higher sales at motor vehicle dealers and gas stations, according to the data.

Apart from the two automotive-related subsectors, core retail sales declined by 1.2%. Sales were up in 6 of 11 subsectors in July, the federal statistics agency said.

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NASA Cybersecurity Remain Below Federal Requirements as Threats Grow - Inspector General

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The National Aeronautics and Space Agency's (NASA) cybersecurity programs fall far below federal requirements even as challenges to them grow from both domestic and foreign sources, NASA Inspector General Paul Martin said in a congressional hearing on Friday.

"The agency's IT [Information Technology] practices continue to fall short of federal requirements. In 2019 its performance review remained at level two out of five," Martin told the US House Committee on Science, Space and Technology.

Martin explained that NASA had struggled to implement an across-the-agency IT security policy to counter cyber threats for more than two decades.

"Three thousand web domains offer cyber criminals a larger target than most federal agencies [provide]," he said.

However, the efforts of successive Chief Information Officers who recognized the dangers had been in significant part frustrated because of the decentralized structure of the agency with key facilities scattered all over the United States, all enjoying considerable autonomy in their IT and cyber practices, Martin added.

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US to Seek Nuclear Safeguards for Iran, N. Korea at Upcoming IAEA Conference - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State for Proliferation Christopher Ford will urge members of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to adopt a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement for civilian power generation during a September 21-24 policy conference, while pressing for a nuclear-free North Korea and for new limits on Iran's production of nuclear fuel, the State Department said in a press release.

"The US delegation will highlight the ongoing threats posed by the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs," the release said on Friday.

The release restated the US goal of a "complete denuclearization" of the Korean Peninsula and criticized Iran over what it called Tehran's "grudging, dilatory and incomplete cooperation - if at all - with the IAEA."

The release made no mention of so-called snapback sanctions, a provision of the 2015 nuclear agreement should Tehran violate nuclear limits in the accord. The UN Security Council last month rejected the United States' call for new penalties against Tehran, arguing that the United States was no longer part of the accord.

The US delegation at the conference, led by Ford, also plans to propose a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement and Additional Protocol that would serve as new global standard for the responsible supply of nuclear power generation technology.

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US Efforts to Build Coalition Against China Threaten Global Stability - Russian Envoy

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Russia's ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov in an interview to Nikkei news agency denounced American attempts to build a multinational coalition to counter China as counterproductive and pledged that Russia will not be part of it.

"Unfortunately, Washington promotes anti-Chinese sentiments and its relations with regional countries are based on their support to such an approach," the agency quoted Antonov as saying. "Russia, for its part, will never participate in coalitions against third countries, including China."

He added that such US efforts threaten global security and stability.

The United States boosts security cooperation with Japan, India and Australia, including conducting joint military exercises, under the so-called "free and open Indo-Pacific" strategy, he said.

According to Nikkei, Antonov argued that contrary to its name, the project is "nontransparent and noninclusive." He called it "closed to a lot of countries and even whole regions if we talk about the Indian Ocean countries."

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US House to Consider Legislation Next Week to Block Imports From China's Xinjiang - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will consider two bills next week that would stop imports from China's Xinjiang region and require US companies to disclose information on whether their supply chains have ties to forced labor camps, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a press conference on Friday.

"Next week, I'm so pleased that we will have two bills on the floor, one of them led by Jim McGovern who is the chair of the China Executive Commission and this is bi-cameral, bipartisan legislation by McGovern to ensure that goods made in the Xinjiang Uighur autonomous region are not made with forced labor - those that are imported into the United States," Pelosi said.

The second bill would require US-listed companies to disclose information of possible links their supply chains may have to forced labor or internment camps, Pelosi added.

On Monday, the Trump administration announced that it will immediately block the import of goods made in China's Xinjiang to end alleged forced labor practices.

Human rights groups say Chinese authorities have detained more than a million people, mostly from Muslim ethnic groups that include Uighurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, in a network of detention centers as part of an assimilation campaign.

China has denied the charges, saying the camps it built for Uighurs and other minorities were for vocational and Chinese language training and not for slave labor.

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US Government Provides Puerto Rico \$13Bln to Help Rebuild Electrical Grid - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Trump administration will provide Puerto Rico with nearly \$13 billion to help rebuild the US territory's electrical grid and to support its education system, the White House said in a press release on Friday.

"Under the leadership of President Trump, FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Administration] will award almost \$13 billion to help rebuild Puerto Rico's electrical grid system and spur recovery of the territory's education system - the largest obligations of funding ever awarded," the release said.

Roughly \$9.6 billion will be used to repair and replace thousands of miles of electrical transmission and distribution lines, electrical substations, power generation systems and office buildings, the release said.

A total of \$2 billion will be used to restore schools and other educational facilities in the territory, the release added.

The US federal government has provided Puerto Rico with about \$26 billion to date to help the territory recover from damages caused by Hurricane Maria in 2017, the release noted.

An independent study conducted by the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health concluded that Hurricane Maria caused the deaths of 2,975 people in Puerto Rico between September 2017 and February 2018.

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Canada's Bloc Quebecois Leader Tests Positive for COVID-19 - Statement

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) – The leader of Canada's Bloc Quebecois, Yves-Francois Blanchet, has tested positive for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), the party said in a statement on Friday.

Blanchet will remain in isolation in his residence in Quebec until September 26 in accordance with guidance from Quebec's public health authorities, the statement said.

The parliamentarian is feeling well, the release added.

The entire Bloc Quebecois caucus has been in self-isolation since Monday, after a staffer tested positive for the disease.

The news comes as Canada's number of novel coronavirus infections steadily climbs. Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam has said that the national spike in cases could jeopardize the country's ability to keep the spread of the pandemic at "manageable levels."

As of Friday, the number of novel coronavirus cases in Canada has surpassed 141,000 with 9,200 virus-related fatalities, government data revealed.

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Canada Extends 'Non-Essential' Travel Ban With US Until October 21 - Minister

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) - Canada has extended border restrictions that limit the so-called "non-essential" travel from the United States until October 21 amid the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic, Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said in a statement on Friday.

"We are extending non-essential travel restrictions with the United States until October 21st, 2020," Blair said via Twitter.

While the measure has proven to be popular among polled Canadians, others, including parliamentarians, say that the restrictions go too far and are leaving entire families separated.

The news comes amid a spike in Canadian novel coronavirus infections. Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam has said that the national spike in cases could jeopardize the country's ability to keep the spread of the virus at "manageable levels."

As of Friday, the number of novel coronavirus cases in Canada has surpassed 141,000 with 9,200 virus-related fatalities, government data revealed.

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Trump Bestows Rare Award to Kuwait's Leader, Hosts His Son - White House

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump has bestowed the rare and prestigious Legion of Merit award to Kuwait's leader and will host on Friday his eldest son who will accept the award during a closed-door event, the White House said in a statement. "Today, President Donald J. Trump is awarding the Legion of Merit, Degree Chief Commander, to His Highness Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, Amir of the State of Kuwait," the statement said. "The Amir's eldest son, His Excellency Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah of the State of Kuwait, will accept the award on behalf of the Amir in a private ceremony."

The Legion of Merit, Degree Chief Commander, is a prestigious award that can only be bestowed by the US president, typically to chiefs of state or heads of government of other countries and was last awarded in 1991.

"A leader in the Middle East for decades, the Amir has been a truly unwavering friend and partner to the United States. He provided indispensable support to the United States throughout Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and the Defeat-ISIS [Islamic State terror group, banned in Russia] campaign," the statement said.

The White House said Amir is "an unparalleled diplomat," who mediated many disputes in the Middle East and a dear friend of President Trump.

The ceremony will take place three days after the White House hosted the signing of US-brokered peace agreements between Israel, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

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US Commerce Chief Says TikTok Will Be Shut Down on November 12

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - TikTok has until November 12 before it is shut down in the United States, Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross said in an interview on Friday.

The US announced earlier that it will block business transactions with the Chinese video sharing app and another called WeChat starting on Sunday.

"Our rule is not doing the same thing to TikTok as WeChat," Ross said, clarifying the Commerce Department statement that President Donald Trump's executive orders blocking US usage of

the two apps will be enforced from September 20. "WeChat US, for all practical purposes, will be shut down. As for TikTok, it's just upgrades, maintenance... things like that would be shut down at this stage. The real shutdown will come November 12, in the event that there is not another transaction."

The statement said the prohibitions in the order can be lifted if "the national security concerns posed by TikTok" can be resolved through ongoing negotiations.

Trump has accused the two apps of being tools of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and that American users of the services could have their personal data stolen.

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US, EU, Canada to Unveil Coordinated Sanctions in Response to Belarus Next Week - Envoy

(Modifies quote, adds details, background in paras 3-7)

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, the European Union and Canada will announce coordinated sanctions against Belarus next week, Acting US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs George Kent told a virtual panel on Friday. "I'm in intense contact with my European – which is EU plus UK at this point – plus Canadian contacts. Our aspiration is to have a coordinated announcement and we'll see if we're able to do that at the beginning of the middle of next week," Kent said during the event hosted by the Atlantic Council in Washington.

Kent added that Belarusian opposition figure Svetlana Tikhanovskaya has asked the United States not to interfere with the country's sovereign affairs.

"Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, when we met with her in Vilnius, made that request: the US should not impede on the sovereignty of Belarus," Kent said. "We agree. That's our policy and we think that should be the policy of every country, including Russia."

The EU is expected to announce sanctions on Belarus in the coming days. According to a source in Brussels, there are 40 names on the EU sanctions manifest, but the list has not been finalized.

On August 9, the Belarusian opposition organized protests after disputing the results of the presidential election in which incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko was reelected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote. The opposition insists that its candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the situation. Moscow has also voiced its concern over the signs of foreign interference in the internal affairs of Belarus.

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UNSC Calls on Afghan Warring Parties to Continue Engaging in Good Faith - Statement

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council said in the statement on Friday that it calls on the Afghan government and the Taliban movement to continue pursuing confidence-building measures and engaging in good faith peace negotiations.

"The members of the Security Council welcomed the start of Afghanistan Peace Negotiations in Doha, Qatar on September 12 2020," the statement said. "The members of the Security Council strongly encouraged parties to the negotiations to continue pursuing confidence-building measures including reductions in violence, and to continue to engage in good faith."

The UN Security Council members also said they believed a sustainable peace could only be achieved through a comprehensive and inclusive Afghan-led peace process aiming for a permanent ceasefire and political settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan.

On February 29, the Taliban and the United States reached a landmark agreement in the Qatari capital of Doha. The key provisions of the deal were that the Taliban and the Afghan government release each other's prisoners - 1,000 and 5,000, respectively - and that the radical movement commits to reduce violence, as prerequisites of launching intra-Afghan talks.

The intra-Afghan negotiations, which began on Saturday in Doha, are now expected to pave the way for a peace process and withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan after almost two decades of war and insurgency.

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In-Person Early Voting Kicks Off in Four US States

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Polling centers opened in the US states of Minnesota, Virginia, South Dakota and Wyoming on Friday to allow voters to cast early in-person ballots for the 2020 presidential election.

Early turnout in the polling stations appeared high in Minnesota, a critical swing state where both President Donald Trump and Democratic candidate Joe Biden plan to visit later in the day. "The Early Vote Center at 980 E. Hennepin Ave opened at 8 a.m. [CST] sharp. In the first 30 minutes, we served 44 Minneapolis voters," Minneapolis Elections and Voter Services said in a tweet.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the electoral process with a far higher proportion of mail-in ballots expected as voters seek to avoid risking virus contagion by visiting polling centers in person. However, lines were long anyway in places like Virginia.

"Plan out your vote. Plan out when you want to come, when you think it's going to be a low turnout," Alexandria City Councilman John Chapman told NBC. "The reason we're expanding voting times and opportunities is to make sure people aren't waiting in line."

Early voting begins in Michigan, New Jersey, Vermont, Illinois and South Carolina before the end of September. More than 35 other states will offer in-person voting from roughly five to around 30 days ahead of the November 3 election.

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Pompeo Announces US Allocated \$5Mln for Venezuelan Refugees in Guayana

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has allocated \$5 million to Guyana to assist Venezuelan refugees there and signed an agreement to enhance private investment in energy and infrastructure projects in the country, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said during a joint press conference with Guyana's President Irfaan Ali after the two officials met earlier on Friday.

"We talked about the need for democracy in Venezuela and an end to an illegitimate regime... You have been a strong partner to us on this issue," Pompeo said. "The United States has allocated \$5 million to help Venezuelans in Guyana who have had to flee... to escape the horrors and brutality of the [Venezuelan President Nicolas] Maduro regime."

The officials announced that Guayana joined the "Growth in the Americas" initiative, which centers on promoting US private sector investments in energy and infrastructure projects across the region.

"I am pleased to announce the signing this morning of... an agreement between the US government and the government of Guayana to strengthen energy, infrastructure, finance, market-building cooperation in the context of the 'Growth in Americas' initiative," Ali said. The United States and Guyana also agreed to enhance cooperation in other fields, including security with an emphasis on fighting drug trafficking.

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Russia Urges West Move to Halt Israeli Strikes on Syria - Ambassador to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - Russia calls on Western countries to exert their influence on Israel and persuade it to halt strikes on neighboring Syria, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on Friday.

"We also see Israeli strikes in Syria. In this regard, we are calling on our Western colleagues to... exert their influence on those who really continue to wage war in Syria," Nebenzia said.

The Russian ambassador's comments came in response to UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen's initiative to establish a nationwide ceasefire in Syria.

"For a long time we've been hearing calls from our Western colleagues for establishing a nationwide ceasefire in Syria. We would like them to clarify what exactly they mean," Nebenzia said. "First, the ceasefire in Syria holds. Second, who should sign such an agreement? The information coming from Syria, including from the United Nations, proves that only terrorists provoke violence in the country. Do we have to sign an agreement with them, legalize them?"

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US Keeps Reviewing Commercial Proposals for TikTok, Despite Looming Ban - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Friday that the Trump administration continues to review the proposal to acquire the Chinese video sharing application TikTok despite the announcement of an impending ban on its transactions and will green-light a sale deal if it guarantees the security of US user data.

"Our goals are really very straightforward - protecting American information data from ending up in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party. While we are reviewing the proposal trying to evaluate if it can successfully achieve those outcomes - that will be our measure - if it's the case we will allow private sector entities to move out - to execute a commercial transaction protecting the American people," Pompeo said.

Earlier on Friday, the Commerce Department announced that the United States will start blocking various transactions by TikTok and another Chinese social media application WeChat from this weekend, including their distribution in the country, to enforce executive orders signed by President Donald Trump.

Trump has accused TikTok of poor data security that enables the Chinese government to obtain information on US users. Trump has threatened to ban TikTok in the United States if the company is not sold to a US entity by mid September.

The US software company Oracle is expected to become a "trusted technology provider" for TikTok in an effort to overcome the restrictions imposed by the US government.

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UN Envoy Calls on Russia, US to Advance Dialogue on Syria

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen on Friday called on Russia and the United States to advance their dialogue toward a political settlement in the Arab Republic.

"I encourage Russia and the United States to advance their dialogue and for them and other key players, including the Astana Guarantors and those who meet in the Small Group, and the members of this Council, to work with me toward our common goal in Syria: a political settlement in line with resolution 2254," Pedersen said during a UN Security Council meeting.

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UN Envoy Pedersen Calls for Nationwide Ceasefire in Syria, Building on Relative Calm

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen called at the Security Council on Friday to establish a nationwide ceasefire in the country, building on the relative calm that exists on the ground.

"While Syria is calmer than before, worrying incidents continue that could destabilize that calm," Pedersen said. "I appeal to all relevant actors to contain these violent and destabilizing incidents, build on the relative calm that exists and, as resolution 2254 calls for, establish a nationwide ceasefire to protect civilians, maintain international peace and security, and support a political process."

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US, EU, Canada to Unveil Coordinated Sanctions in Response to Belarus Next Week - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) – The United States, the European Union and Canada will announce coordinated sanctions against Belarus next week, Acting US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs George Kent told a virtual panel on Friday. "Our aspiration is to have a coordinated announcement and we'll see if we're able to do that at the beginning of the middle of next week," Kent said during the event hosted by the Atlantic Council in Washington.

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US to Block TikTok, WeChat Transactions Starting on Sunday - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States will block transactions by Chinese social media applications TikTok and WeChat from this weekend to enforce executive orders signed by President Donald Trump, the Commerce Department announced on Friday.

"In response to President Trump's Executive Orders signed August 6, 2020, the Department of Commerce (Commerce) today announced prohibitions on transactions relating to mobile applications (apps) WeChat and TikTok to safeguard the national security of the United States," the department said in a statement.

The US will as of September 20 prohibit app store downloads and transfer of funds for TikTok and WeChat as a first step toward a total ban of the apps on November 12, the statement said. The prohibitions in the order can be lifted if "the national security concerns posed by TikTok" can be resolved through ongoing negotiations, it added.

"The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has demonstrated the means and motives to use these apps to threaten the national security, foreign policy, and the economy of the US. Today's announced prohibitions, when combined, protect users in the US by eliminating access to these applications and significantly reducing their functionality" the Commerce Department said.

The move to block the two applications will surprise financial markets which have been closely following for weeks intense negotiations involving, particularly, TikTok and several US companies such as Oracle, Microsoft and Walmart to work out a partnership that would satisfy the Trump administration's concerns on protecting the data of Americans using Chinese media apps.

Just on Thursday, Trump himself said that Oracle and TikTok were "really very close to a deal." He also said he had a "high level of respect" for Oracle Chairman Larry Ellison, whom he described as a "really terrific guy." CNBC reported that TikTok and Oracle were pursuing a deal that would make the US software company a "trusted technology provider" in the United States for the Chinese firm.

TikTok filed a lawsuit in a US court last month to defend itself against any blockage of its US operations. It said the administration's action was without any prior outreach to the company that gave it a chance to respond to the accusations, violating the US Constitution and the firm's right to due process.

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US Democratic Senators Unveil \$350Bln Funding Package to Counter China's Rise

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Nearly a dozen US Senate Democrats have sponsored new legislation to fund efforts to counter China's edge in areas such as manufacturing, technology and science.

"The proposal includes over \$350 billion in new funding to synchronize and mobilize all aspects of US national power," a release from Senator Sherrod Brown's office revealed on Thursday.

"Sponsored by 11 leading Democrats, the legislation is guided by four pillars: (1) invest in

American competitiveness; (2) support American alliances and partners; (3) restore and advance a values-centered foreign policy; and (4) ensure China pays a price for its predatory actions."

The so-called "America Leads Act," according to the statement, is needed as a "course correction, after almost four years of destruction under President [Donald] Trump."

The package aims to make comprehensive investments in US workers, alliances, and diplomacy "to confront the rise of china."

The proposal also seeks to "reaffirm America's strong security commitment in the Indo-Pacific and a forward-deployed posture in the region to ensure that all nations can exercise their rights in the region's international waters."

In addition, the senators hope to strengthen trade enforcement across a wide range of areas including intellectual property, supply chains, currency manipulation, and counterfeit goods, the release said.

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Twitter Public Policy Director Joins Biden Campaign - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Twitter Public Policy Director Carlos Monje has left the social media giant to join Joe Biden's campaign team, Politico reported.

President Donald Trump has long slammed social media giants for allegedly being biased towards the Democratic Party. Moreover, Twitter has censored a number of the president's tweets in recent months.

Monje will join the Democratic presidential nominee's transition team, the report said on Thursday, citing a person familiar with the move.

Biden's transition team declined to comment and requests for comment sent to Monje were not immediately returned, the report said.

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US, Indonesian Defense Officials Hold Talks on South China Sea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Acting US Under Secretary of Defense Policy, James Anderson, during a visit to Indonesia discussed China's actions in the South China Sea among other security issues, the Pentagon said in a press release.

"The leaders discussed a range of regional issues including the South China Sea, counter-terrorism, cyber threats, and U.S. investment in Indonesia. They also discussed pending defense acquisitions," the release said on Thursday.

Anderson also expressed solidarity with Indonesia's efforts to combat COVID-19, the release added.

Anderson met with Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto, Chief of Defense Air Chief Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto, Minister of Foreign Affairs Retno Marsudi, and Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Pandjaitan, the Pentagon said.

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Canadian Opposition Leader Says He Will Ban Huawei 'From 5G' Ahead of Possible Election

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) - A Conservative government in Canada will ban Chinese telecommunications giant Huawei from the development of the country's 5G network, party leader Erin O'Toole said in a statement ahead of a possible fall election.

"Unlike [Prime Minister] Justin Trudeau, I don't take entities of the Chinese regime at their word. If I'm [Prime Minister] Huawei will be banned from 5G," O'Toole said via Twitter on Thursday. Canada is the last of the so-called Five Eyes intelligence-sharing allies with Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom not to rule out Huawei's involvement in the 5G development. Canada has faced mounting pressure from senior US officials to prohibit Huawei's participation. The incumbent Liberal government has said Canada will not be swayed by outside jurisdictions when making a decision on Huawei's participation in its 5G development.

An election can be triggered as early as September 23, when Trudeau's Liberal government presents its long-term COVID-19 economic recovery plan via a throne speech. Trudeau's recovery plan will then be put to a vote and a fall election could be called if his speech does not get a vote of confidence.

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Ex-FBI Director Comey to Appear Before Senate Judiciary Panel on September 30 - Chairman

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Former FBI Director James Comey will appear before the US Senate Judiciary Committee on September 30, panel chairman Lindsey Graham said in an interview.

"The day of reckoning is upon us," Graham told FOX News on Thursday. "James Comey has agreed to appear before the Senate Judiciary Committee. He will be respectfully treated... We will have Mr. Comey before the committee and I look forward to it."

Graham acknowledged that he was dubious about the number of then-FBI senior officials who claimed they had lost or accidentally erased the records of their cell phones in discussing Crossfire Hurricane, the FBI Counterintelligence Crossfire Hurricane probe of President Donald Trump's alleged connections with Russia, for which no evidence was ever found.

"Common sense [says] it sounds fishy as hell. We are going to ask the people who did the erasing. We will try to find out, how was the FISA [Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act] court

mislead multiple times? That day is coming. We are getting to the bottom of what happened," Graham said.

The committee was also negotiating with former FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe about his appearing before it before the November 3 presidential election without having to be subpoenaed by it, Graham said. Former Special Counsel Robert Mueller has declined the invitation of the committee to testify in its probe into, he added.

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Canadian Opposition Leader Says Trudeau Must Answer for Failure of COVID-19 Testing Regime

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau must be held accountable for the country's faltering COVID-19 testing regime, Conservative Party Leader Erin O'Toole said in a statement.

O'Toole made the comments after he and his family were turned away from an Ottawa-area COVID-19 testing facility after waiting in line for "hours."

"The Trudeau Liberals have created this mess by refusing to approve other testing methods – despite all our allies having, for months, multiple tests including much faster and less invasive methods," O'Toole said on Thursday.

O'Toole said Trudeau must answer for why Canada does not have access to more of the tests the country's allies are using.

Canadian officials have acknowledged the need for a more diverse testing strategy, but more than seven months into the pandemic Health Canada has yet to approve new devices.

As of Thursday, the number of novel coronavirus cases in Canada has surpassed 140,000 with 9,199 virus-related deaths, government data revealed.

A combined 544 new cases in Ontario and Quebec pushed Canada's tally to 140,291, according to data released by provincial health agencies. Since the beginning of September, Canadian authorities have recorded more than 11,000 new infections, including more than 6,000 in the last week alone, according to government data.

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Toronto, Ottawa Residents Face \$7,600 Fine for Large Parties - Statement

TORONTO, September 18 (Sputnik) - Some residents in the Canadian province of Ontario face a \$7,600 for hosting large private gatherings, including parties, amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, the provincial government said in statement.

The measure will apply to residents in Toronto, the adjacent Peel Region and the City of Ottawa, according to the statement.

"While most Ontarians are following provincial orders and public health guidelines, those caught breaking the rules will now face stiffer penalties. We are taking stronger action by setting a minimum fine of \$10,000 [\$7,600 USD] for people who organize gatherings in private residences that violate social gathering restrictions and recklessly put others at risk," Solicitor General Sylvia Jones said in the statement on Thursday.

As part of the measures, the number of people who can gather indoors is being reduced to 10 from 50 and to 25 people from 100 in outdoor settings.

The move comes as Canada's number of novel coronavirus infections steadily climbs. Earlier in the day, Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam said that the national spike in cases – at least a quarter of which can be traced to the three municipalities – could jeopardize the country's ability to keep the spread of the pandemic at "manageable levels."

As of Thursday, the number of novel coronavirus cases in Canada has surpassed 140,000 with 9,199 virus-related deaths, government data revealed.

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Facebook Says It Targets Entire User Groups for Hate Speech of Individual Members

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Facebook said in a press release that it has extended its campaign against hate speech with a policy that will put entire groups on 30 days probation for members' posts, with the entire group banned if the group administrator continues approving offensive messages.

"For members who have any Community Standards violations in a group, their posts in that group will now require approval for the next 30 days. This stops their post from being seen by others until an admin [group administrator] or moderator approves it. If admins or moderators repeatedly approve posts that violate our Community Standards, we will remove the group," the release said on Thursday.

The new rules mark the latest in a series of steps by Facebook to police content on its platform. In the past year, Facebook removed about 12 million pieces of content in groups for violating policies on hate speech, 87 percent of which platform monitors or algorithms discovered as opposed to posts flagged by offended users, the release said.

"That's what we do for posts within groups. When it comes to groups themselves, we will take an entire group down if it repeatedly breaks our rules or if it was set up with the intent to violate our standards," the release added.

Facebook said it had banned more than 1 million groups in the past year for violating the platform's hate-speech policies, according to the release.

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US Judge Blocks Trump Postal Rules That Could Disrupt Election

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge in a new ruling halted the Trump administration from implementing new postal rules that could disrupt the mail system ahead of the November 3 election.

"The states have demonstrated that the defendants are involved in a politically motivated attack on the efficiency of the Postal Service. They have also demonstrated that this attack on the Postal Service is likely to irreparably harm the states' ability to administer the 2020 general election," Chief Judge Stanley Bastian from the Eastern District of the state of Washington said as quoted by The Washington Posts on Thursday.

The judge granted a request from 14 states to temporarily block operational changes that have been blamed for a slowdown in mail delivery, the report added.

Trump's postmaster general, Louis DeJoy, has come under fire for pushing changes that would slow down mail delivery in a year that is expected to see a record-level of mailed ballots.

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US Navy Orders new Robot-Controlled Unmanned Surface Ship - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has ordered plans to be drawn up for the construction of a large, unmanned surface ship, Lockheed Martin said in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin will provide a study for a proven, integrated and capable payload ship, able to patrol for extended durations, as part of the US Navy's Large Unmanned Surface Vessel (LUSV) competition," the release said on Thursday.

Lockheed Martin said in the release that it is partnering with the Vigor Works Company in Portland, Oregon, to build the vessel. The \$7 million design, to be delivered within a year, will use a commercial ship augmented with automation, autonomy and cybersecurity elements to house a payload, the release explained.

The design will leverage Lockheed Martin's platform-agnostic Sikorsky MATRIX technology that has been used to fly a helicopter from a wireless tablet, and its AXIS control technology now used on more than half of US Navy surface ships to manage engineering and machinery controls, the release said.

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US Plans to Launch Hundreds of Satellites to Ensure 'Resilience' - Space Agency Chief

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is on track to launch hundreds of satellites into Low Earth Orbit in successive waves, or tranches in the next six years to ensure a

resilient communications, sensor and weapons targeting system that cannot be disrupted, US Space Development Agency Director Derek Tournear told a space engineers conference. "[We are] coming up with hundreds of satellites that do those missions that talk directly to a weapons platform," Tournear told the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) AscentX Conference on National Security Space on Thursday. "We are getting tied closely with the Army, the Navy and the Air Forces JADC2 (Joint All Domain Command and Control) backbone for the department."

Tournear explained the satellites will be deployed in different layers starting with those equipped with sensing capability such as infrared imaging and tracking.

"Every two years we will launch a viable product ... hundreds of satellites allowing persistence," he said.

On August 31, Tournear announced that the Space Development Agency awarded two contracts to develop a constellation of satellites that will serve as the communications backbone for other proposed systems.

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Pennsylvania Supreme Court Extends Deadline for Mail-In Ballots in State - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The Pennsylvania Supreme Court has decided to extend the mail-in ballot deadline in the state to November 6, court documents revealed. The court decided on Thursday to add a three-day deadline extension to receive mail-in ballots that are postmarked by 8:00 pm local time on Election Day, November 3. Moreover, the court also ruled that ballot drop boxes are legal in the state. This ruling is expected to have a significant impact in the US election since Pennsylvania is considered a battleground state. This ruling will allow more votes to be counted since previously mail-in ballots were due on Election Day.

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Twenty-Nine Countries Urge Belarus to Refrain From Internet Shutdowns - Joint Statement

UNITED NATIONS, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US Department of State issued a joint statement in which 29 countries called on the government of Belarus to refrain from Internet shutdowns amid the ongoing protests in the country. "We, the signatories, are deeply troubled by and condemn the recently reported and ongoing use of partial and complete Internet shutdowns, as well as targeted content blocking, by the government of Belarus in the aftermath of the fraudulent 2020 Belarusian presidential elections," the statement said on Thursday. "We call on Belarusian authorities to refrain from Internet

shutdowns and blocking or filtering of services and to respect Belarus's international human rights obligations."

The statement said that blocking or hindering Internet connectivity may undermine the rights of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, limit press freedom, harm social and political order and affect public safety.

"We call on the government of Belarus to respect civic space, including respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law," the statement said.

In addition, the statement also said that all allegations of human rights abuses in the aftermath of the election must be subjected to independent, transparent and impartial investigations.

The statement was signed by the United States, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Ukraine.

On August 9, incumbent leader Alexander Lukashenko won 80.1 percent of the vote and won the presidential elections in Belarus for the sixth time. The opposition has claimed that former presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya won the election.

The opposition organized protests across Belarus and in the first several days law enforcement dispersed them. However, law enforcement has since stopped dispersing the rallies and using force. More than 6,700 people were detained in the first days of protests and three protesters died.

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US Charges Parnas, Correia With Conspiring to Defraud Investors - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Justice announced that it has charged Ukraine-born businessman Lev Parnas and his colleague David Correia, who allegedly acted on behalf of US President Donald Trump to undermine Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden's campaign, with conspiring to defraud investors.

"LEV PARNAS and DAVID CORREIA were charged in a Superseding Indictment with conspiring to commit wire fraud in connection with their efforts to raise funds ostensibly for their business," the statement said on Thursday.

The indictment also includes additional campaign finance charges against the defendants. According to the indictment, Parnas and Correia conspired to defraud multiple victims by inducing them to invest in their company, "Fraud Guarantee," based on materially false and misleading representations.

The two falsely claimed that the investors' funds would be used solely for legitimate business expenses of "Fraud Guarantee" when in the funds were largely withdrawn as cash, transferred to personal accounts and used for various apparently personal expenditures, according to the prosecution, the indictment said.

Parnas has allegedly been linked to Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, who investigated Biden's dealings in Ukraine. In October 2019, US federal prosecutors unsealed an indictment

against Parnas, Correia and two other businessmen - Igor Fruman and Andrey Kukushkin - for funneling \$1 million in donations from foreign nationals to unspecified political campaigns in the United States.

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US Forces Need to Prevent Space-Launched Attacks on Military Assets - Space Command

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - US Space and Cyber Forces must be able to disrupt adversaries' efforts to disrupt terrestrial forces through their own space forces, US Space Command Chief Architect Michael Dickey told the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) AscentX Conference on National Security Space.

"[US space-based military assets must] be able to disrupt adversaries' attempts to disrupt terrestrial forces through their own space forces," Dickey told a panel at the conference on Thursday.

Space Development Agency Director Derek Tournear told the conference that the goal of the US Space Forces would be to establish US space dominance in what he called the "cis-lunar" environment between low earth orbit satellites at 200 miles above the Earth and high earth orbit geosynchronous satellites 22,000 miles above the earth.

Tournear said US forces needed to deploy a "space situational awareness layer [in the] cislunar above geo-spatial (22,000 miles up) so that space force can prosecute that information."

Dickey is also the director of the Enterprise Strategy and Architectures Office. He oversees, directs and coordinates efforts of multiple Department of Defense and other organizations' efforts to implement a resilient, multi-domain compatible enterprise for space mission areas, according to published reports.

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Twitter Enhancing Security of US High-Profile Politicians' Accounts Ahead of Elections

WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik) - Twitter announced in a press release that it is boosting security for accounts belonging to high-profile US politicians ahead of the upcoming November elections.

"As we learn from the experience of past security incidents and implement changes, we're also focused on keeping high-profile accounts on Twitter safe and secure during the 2020 US election," the release said on Thursday. "We're taking the additional step of proactively implementing account security measures for a designated group of high-profile, election-related Twitter accounts in the United States."

The enhanced security measures will apply to accounts in the White House, Congress, US governors, secretaries of state, presidential campaigns, several candidates running for Congress or governor, the release said.

These high-profile Twitter users will need to use strong passwords and will be encouraged to enable a two-factor authentication feature. Twitter will also have password reset protection enabled for the high-profile accounts in order to prevent any unauthorized password changes, the release said.

In addition, Twitter will implement more internal security protections that will boost detection of suspicious activity, increased login defenses to prevent hacking and faster account recovery support, the release said.

Twitter had a massive security breach in July when a 17-year-old teenager in the state of Florida led a massive hack on the social media platform that targeted high-profile accounts, including Bill Gates, Barack Obama and Elon Musk.

According to Twitter, a total of 130 social media accounts were hacked, 45 of which were used to post. The company previously reported that hackers entered the internal systems using the credentials of a small number of employees.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, September 18 (Sputnik)

EU PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION ON RUSSIA

- * The European Parliament on Thursday adopted a resolution calling for tougher sanctions against Russia over the case of Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny.
- * Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Moscow will respond in a reciprocal manner if the West imposes sanctions over the events in Belarus and the Navalny case.

TIKTOK SALE

- * President Donald Trump is reviewing all options on TikTok as his administration weighs on a deal between the Chinese video sharing application and the US software company Oracle, White House Economic Adviser Larry Kudlow said on Thursday.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

- * Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Thursday that the fate of all of Europe is being decided in Belarus and the situation cannot be brought to a hot war.
- * The Belarusian army has to reinforce its borders with Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine with troops, Lukashenko said.
- * The Belarusian Foreign Ministry slammed the European Parliament's resolution on the country's recent presidential election as aggressive and ignorant.

* Belarus will become the first country to receive Russian vaccine against the coronavirus, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST IRAN, HEZBOLLAH

* The United States has imposed sanctions on an alleged Iranian cyber threat group linked to the country's Intelligence Ministry along with 45 associated individuals, the US Treasury Department said in a press release on Thursday.

* The United States has imposed sanctions on two companies and an individual in Lebanon over their alleged links to leadership of Hezbollah, the Treasury Department said in a press release.

INDIA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi spoke over the telephone and confirmed the commitment to further strengthen the countries' strategic partnership, the Kremlin said on Thursday.